The Bologna Process and the Reform of the Italian Higher Education System

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When I first thought about a presentation on the Bologna Process I was attracted by the dynamic aspect of this topic as expressed by the word "process", which certainly implies a chronological sequence of events but can also be approached in conceptual terms by identifying the spirit and atmosphere that prevailed at each stage of its development. There are four steps in the Bologna Process that I consider most significant and that I would like to discuss in this paper: cooperation, convergence, change and coordination.

1 Cooperation

Although the Bologna Process officially started in the late nineties, it is quite clear that the conditions that made it possible had already been created in the previous decade. This can be considered the first stage in the process – the stage of cooperation.

In 1987, the European Commission launched the Erasmus programme to promote cooperation among EU higher education institutions. They were encouraged to make agreements for exchanging students for a limited period of time (a semester or a year) and giving them full recognition for studies done abroad. At the same time the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was developed in a pilot project, in order to facilitate academic recognition. Teachers were also encouraged to visit institutions in other European countries, in order to teach, monitor their students abroad and develop joint curricula with colleagues in those institutions. With candidate countries coming gradually into the Erasmus programme, cooperation extended well beyond EU borders and made all participants aware that Europe was defined in much broader terms. Thematic networks were also developed at a later stage to channel the efforts made within the various subject areas and to develop Europe-wide forums for discussion.

Institutions participated in these activities on a voluntary basis. Especially at the beginning they relied mostly on the initiative and goodwill of individuals (teachers and administrators) who made the first contacts, developed personal relations and established solid networks of institutions. Student and teacher exchanges were carried out

through regular meetings and correspondence, diversity was faced with curiosity, and problems were solved through mutual confidence. In those years people involved learned to cooperate with colleagues from other countries, other cultures, other educational systems – often using other languages – and found that cooperation was a stimulating exercise, a reward in itself.

2 Convergence

While the management of EU-driven educational programmes was gradually moving from individual professors to the central administrations of educational institutions, thus making policy-makers more aware of the prospects of European cooperation, some governments began to show interest in the development of an open European Higher Education Area and agreed to adopt national policies intended to achieve this goal in a reasonable period of time. This was the second stage in the process – the stage of convergence.

The first joint declaration was signed by the Ministers of Education of France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom at the Sorbonne on May 25th, 1998, eleven years after the start of the Erasmus programme. The main convergence principles were already there:

- acknowledgement of the diversity of educational systems,
- willingness to further cooperate and promote mobility in higher education by harmonising the architecture of the European higher education system. This meant moving towards a common frame of reference based on two main cycles and towards the use of a common credit system based on ECTS.

One year later (June 19th, 1999), the Ministers of Education of 29 European countries (15 EU countries, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Swiss Confederation) gathered in Bologna to express their support of the common goal of establishing a European Higher Education Area and to refine the details. In clear terms, they committed themselves to coordinating policies to reach a number of specific objectives by the year 2010. On that occasion, a follow-up structure was also organised to monitor progress, to coordinate activities and to organise further meetings. The European Commission, originally confined to an observing role, became a full member of the follow-up group offering a valuable contribution of experience in European educational programmes and contributing to the funding of several activities within the process.

Two years later (May 19th, 2001), 32 Ministers of Education (Croatia, Cyprus and Turkey had joined in the meantime) met in Prague to reaffirm the main goal of establishing a European Higher Education Area, and to emphasise the need to make this area more attractive to students not only from Europe but also from other parts of the world. As expressed in their final communiqué, they agreed to confirm and expand the specific objectives set out in the previous declaration. Such objectives can be summarised as follows:

2.1 Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement

The goal is to improve the international transparency and academic recognition of qualifications. The Diploma Supplement – based on the model developed by the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the UNESCO – provides a description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed by the holder of the qualification.

In the Prague Communiqué, Ministers "strongly encouraged universities and other higher education institutions to take full advantage of existing national legislation and European tools aimed at facilitating academic and professional recognition of course units, degrees and other awards, so that citizens can effectively use their qualifications, competencies and skills throughout the European Higher Education Area".

2.2 Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate

"Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification." (Bologna Declaration)

The Prague Communiqué also pointed out that "programmes leading to a degree may, and indeed should, have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs."

2.3 Establishment of a system of credits – such as in the ECTS system – as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility

"Credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning provided they are recognised by receiving universities concerned." (Bologna Declaration)

The Prague Communiqué further recommends the use of "a credit system such as the ECTS or one that is ECTS-compatible, providing both transferability and accumulation functions". This recommendation refers to developments that had taken place in ECTS, transforming it from a European credit transfer system to a European credit transfer and accumulation system. This means that degrees are awarded only after the accumulation of a given number of appropriate credits, which can also be transferred from one institution/programme to another. According to the ECTS key features, ECTS credits (60 per each academic year) "are based on the workload required of a student to attain the educational objectives of a course of study, objectives preferably expressed as learning outcomes and competences to be acquired".

2.4 Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement

"... for students, access to study and training opportunities and to related services; for teachers, researchers and administrative staff, recognition and valorisation of periods spent in a European context ..., without prejudicing their statutory rights". (Bologna Declaration)

2.5 Promotion of European cooperation in Quality Assurance (Q.A.) with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies

The Prague communiqué emphasises "the vital role that Q.A. systems play in ensuring high quality standards and facilitating the comparability of qualifications throughout Europe". Ministers recommend "closer cooperation between recognition and quality assurance networks", ... "mutual trust in and acceptance of national Q.A. systems" and "collaboration among institutions, national agencies and ENQA (European Network of Quality Assurance) in establishing a common framework of reference and to disseminate best practice". These recommendations show full awareness of the national nature of Q.A. systems and understanding of the delicate balance between internal improvement functions and external accountability functions of Q.A. systems in institutions.

2.6 Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education

"... particularly with regard to curricular development, inter-institutional cooperation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research" (Bologna declaration).

The Prague communiqué recommends an increase in "the development of modules, courses and curricula at all levels with 'European' content, orientation or organisation ... offered in partnership by institutions from different countries and leading to a recognised joint degree".

The experience made in the Erasmus programme with joint curriculum development at various levels can be very useful for achieving this objective. The recent Erasmus Mundus initiative is further contributing to it.

2.7 Promotion of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong Learning was introduced in the Prague Communiqué "as an essential element of the European Higher Education Area". The document states clearly that "in the future Europe, built upon a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies, and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life".

2.8 Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area

The Prague Communiqué emphasises "the importance of enhancing the attractiveness of European higher education to students from Europe and other parts of the world". It also stresses that "the quality of higher education and research is and should be an important determinant of Europe's international attractiveness and competitiveness". In between the Bologna and Prague meetings (March 2001), when the Bologna Process was definitely under way, the two European organisations of Rectors' Conferences, while merging into the European University Association, invited European universities to meet in Salamanca to discuss the developments, reach a common position and provide their inputs to the Ministers meeting in Prague. In the documents developed as a response to the initiative of the Ministers, the European universities

- expressed their support to the European Higher Education Area,
- showed their willingness to take an active role in the process,

- reaffirmed the principles of: institutional autonomy and responsibility; education as a public good and a service to society; the crucial role of research; the value of diversity,
- expressed their concern with quality as a necessary precondition for mutual confidence, relevance to the labour market, mobility and comparability of qualifications, attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area,
- asked governments for the necessary support to enable them to engage in the changes required by the process.

This responsible attitude started a positive interaction with the governments, which gave more prominence to another aspect of the Bologna Process:

2.9 The role of higher education institutions and students

While in the Bologna Declaration the Universities were expected to "respond promptly and positively and to contribute actively to the success of the endeavour", in the Prague Communiqué "the involvement of Universities and other Higher Education Institutions ... as competent, active and constructive partners in the establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area is needed and welcomed". Moreover, the Communiqué affirms that "students should also participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions" and emphasises "the need to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna Process".

In the Berlin Communiqué (September 19th, 2003), signed by forty countries, Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the nine objectives that had already been agreed upon in the previous meetings and added a new one:

2.10 European Higher Education Area and European Research Area – two pillars of the knowledge based society

"Efforts shall be undertaken in order to secure closer links overall between the higher education and research systems in their respective countries. The emerging European Higher Education Area will benefit from synergies with the European Research Area, thus strengthening the basis of the Europe of knowledge." Moreover, Ministers "consider it necessary to go beyond the present focus on two main cycles of higher education to include the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna Process. ... They call for increased mobility at the doctoral and postdoctoral levels and encourage the institutions

concerned to increase their cooperation in doctoral studies and the training of young researchers."

The Berlin Communiqué also emphasises the social dimension of the Bologna Process. "The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and European level. In that context, Ministers reaffirm their position that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility. They emphasise that in international academic cooperation and exchanges, academic values should prevail."

Moreover, the Communiqué expresses the Ministers' concern about the progress being made in the various actions. They "stressed the need to intensify the efforts at institutional, national and European level". To give the process further momentum, they committed themselves to three intermediate priorities for the two years preceding the next meeting, to be held in Bergen in May 2005:

- quality assurance,
- two-cycle system,
- recognition of degrees and periods of study.

3 Change

The experience with cooperation and the convergence process have triggered a number of structural reforms in most European countries. In some cases they have affected the entire educational system; in others they have had a more limited range. In some cases the reforms have been introduced drastically, while in others a more gradual approach has been adopted. Accordingly, it seems that most higher education institutions in Europe are currently undergoing some sort of structural, curricular or organisational change, with varying degrees of the involvement/consensus of academics, administrators and students, and with more or less adequate human/financial resources for the achievement of their goals.

The new Italian Law, passed in 1999 and amended in 2004, is an example of a comprehensive, radical reform of an educational system along European lines. The traditional long study programmes have been changed into a two-tier system based on a first degree called Laurea (3 years – 180 credits) and a second degree first called Laurea Specialistica and now renamed Laurea Magistralis (2 years – 120 credits); an ECTS-based credit

accumulation system has been adopted on a national level; and the awarding of the Diploma Supplement, which should make it easier to understand national diplomas, has been made mandatory for all institutions. Moreover, substantial financial incentives have been made available to universities to develop integrated programmes with European partner institutions and to promote student mobility. The reform, fully implemented as of the academic year 2001–2002 (some universities started in 2000–2001 on an experimental basis), has also expanded the curricular autonomy of institutions, and allowed them to be more creative in redesigning their curricula within the new European framework. Undoubtedly, Italy's prompt adherence to the Bologna Process is also due to the widespread recognition that the system needed reconsideration and thorough transformation. European principles have, therefore, been accepted and implemented, though not without hesitation and difficulties, as the starting point for a long term-process of wide-ranging change.

The structure of new curricula, organised in ECTS credits, is based not only on codified discipline groups but also on six types of educational activities: four types of taught courses (foundation, specialisation, support and elective courses), the preparation of the final exam and a group of activities of different kinds (language or computer learning, internships, work experience). There are three normative levels for the design of the new curricula. First, the national level, regulated by Ministerial decrees, providing a broad definition of the educational goals for homogeneous groups (classes) of degree courses in the two cycles, and indicating the relevant types of educational activities and discipline groups with the minimum number of credits required for each of them. Second, the institutional level, regulated by the General Academic Regulations of the University, providing a specific definition of the educational goals and academic profile (knowledge and abilities) pursued by each degree course, and allocating credits to each activity and discipline group included in it. Third, the departmental level, regulated by Degree Course Regulations, indicating the breakdown of the pertinent disciplines into single units/modules, allocating credits to each of them, and presenting the curricula offered to students together with their approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

Parallel to the design of the new curricula, new agreements were made with professional organisations, in order to clarify what professional roles could be played by the different types of qualifications. The role of the National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System was also strengthened in order to promote both internal and external evaluation schemes.

At the moment, there is limited data available on the results of the first implementation of the new degree courses. The Italian Rectors' Conference conducted a survey in 2002 to find out how the reform was being perceived by the main academic actors engaged in implementing it (rectors, deans, heads of department). On the positive side, the respondents felt that the new organisation of studies would solve the existing structural problems, such as the prolongation of studies and the high dropout rate, would meet diverse educational needs and would facilitate national and international mobility; on the negative side, they considered it not accompanied by adequate additional resources and still too rigid, as the second cycle was based on the accumulation of 300 credits which were partly prescribed at the central level. More data come from a comparative analysis of profiles of graduates from old integrated courses and new first cycle programmes, made by Almalaurea on 60% of all 2003 graduates from Italian universities including a small sample from the new programmes. This analysis showed some interesting trends: the percentage of graduates who had completed their studies in time and attended their courses regularly had visibly increased in the new programmes, as well as the percentage of those who had had the opportunity to do an internship in a company. Of the students who had completed their studies in time, a higher percentage from the new courses than from the old ones had expressed the intention to continue their studies, which may indicate that the shorter cycle was still perceived as a half of a full cycle and its value on the labour market was not clear yet. At the time of writing there are no official data available yet on the percentage of students from the new system who actually registered in second cycle courses in the current academic year (2004–2005).

From debates going on in institutions, it was also clear that several aspects of the reform were creating remarkable difficulties to the academics engaged in developing and teaching the new programmes. First, it was not easy to design first cycle curricula which could reconcile the two different functions they were required to have: foundation to second cycle on the one hand, and relevance to the labour market on the other. Second, it was felt that the academic autonomy of institutions was inadequate to the task, and the scope allowed to them in curriculum design was still too limited, due to the high number of credits already allocated at the national level in each class. Finally, the new ECTS-based credit system was difficult to implement properly, as it implied allocating credits on the basis of student workload and desired learning outcomes as well as monitoring the correspondence between the credits allocated to a unit/module and the actual student time required to complete it successfully. In this respect, the new system required a shift from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach which was not easy to make in a short time.

Another frequent complaint heard from some academics while implementing the first cycle was that the academic quality of such courses would be lower than that of the previous ones and would not be appreciated by the labour market. The counter-argument from others was that it was probably necessary to fully develop the two cycles and clearly differentiate their functions before comparing the new system to the old one; that the market did in fact require a variety of qualifications, although it would probably take some time to recognise and appreciate the new degrees. Also the idea of designing curricula with the desired learning outcomes in mind created some disconcert in those who maintained that content was the only essential element in a degree course; in fact, the two elements did not seem to be in conflict, as disciplines still constituted a substantial component of any curriculum: what was added to the traditional approach was a consideration of what the students would actually learn from the content taught and what they would be able to do with it. This debate shows that any structural change implies a sometimes painful transition phase and some cultural adaptation to the new principles.

Besides changing the degree names, the 2004 amendments to the reform law tried to solve the problems deriving from rigidity of the two cycles and limited autonomy of institutions which had been broadly criticised by academics. The two cycles were neatly separated – with 180 credits in the first cycle and 120 in the second cycle – and made more flexible – with fewer reserved credits at the central level. A Y-shaped curriculum structure (first year in common and different orientations in the second/third years) was also recommended for first cycle programmes, with the objective of better serving their different functions. Although welcome in structural terms, these amendments have caused a second wave of changes at the curricular level, which is putting additional strain on academics and students. It is hoped that a long period of stability will now allow institutions to absorb and consolidate the reforms that have been implemented.

4 Coordination

While change is taking place in individual countries and institutions, the question frequently arises whether this transformation, although inspired by the same basic principles, is actually being implemented in a coherent way. Are jointly conceived ideas being interpreted in the same way or are they filtered through deeply embedded national and institutional cultures? Is it realistic to expect that they should be interpreted in the same way?

In an attempt to answer these questions, let's consider the case of the first cycle of study provided by the Bologna Declaration. The document states that this cycle should last a

minimum of three years (180 credits) and that the degree awarded should also be relevant to the labour market. While there seems to be a general trend towards a 3-year duration, relevance to the labour market is not always interpreted in the same way. Guy Haug and Christian Tauch reported as early as in 2001 that more professionally oriented degrees offered by certain institutions in certain disciplines coexist with more academic or scientific degrees offered by other institutions or in other disciplines, the general orientation being "not that first degrees should be just a preparation for particular well-defined professions, but rather that certain dimensions required for nearly all future professional activities (transversal skills) should receive due attention". This shows, on the one hand, that certain types of institutions and certain disciplines in certain educational systems tend to apply the same principle in different ways; and, on the other hand, that a common denominator can always be found if the principle is redefined in broader terms that take the diversity of institutions and disciplines into account.

Another example is the adoption of ECTS-based credit systems by most European countries. The system provides for 60 credits per year, to be allocated to course units on the basis of the student workload required to achieve the desired learning outcomes. While the 60 credits per year are easily implemented in all countries concerned, the allocation of credits in different countries/institutions/disciplines is still affected by other factors, such as the role played by teaching hours or the tendency to focus more on workload than on learning outcomes or vice versa. Widespread awareness of these differences in the implementation of the basic principle in various countries/institutions/disciplines may lead to a more comprehensive model of credits that should take jointly into account both student workload and learning outcomes as well as teaching/learning methods.

This is why there is a need for long term coordination among European institutions in the various disciplines. After a common framework has been sketched by the ministries, it is now urgent for European institutions and academics in different subject areas to analyse the changes taking place in their individual countries and to compare interpretation and implementation trends, in order to redefine or reorient together common principles whenever divergent interpretations and tendencies emerge. This can be done either in thematic networks or in pilot projects like "Tuning Educational Structures in Europe" or in other European organisations and groups where representatives of institutions – or simply committed academics and administrators – work together to construct a common European educational system.

Though it seems we are back to where we started in the late eighties, back to institutions, disciplines and individuals, the context is totally different. Over the past years, in addition to the European Commission, other actors at the highest academic and administrative levels have become deeply involved in the development of a European Higher Education Area and have contributed to creating a well-structured common framework: national governments, national and European rectors' conferences, European students' associations, academic authorities and senior administrators of European institutions, and many academics in all subject areas. Clear formulation of the common objectives and the development of useful instruments have created a common framework that has triggered change in all systems. Now there is enough of a critical mass to help groups of academics and administrators from different countries coordinate efforts taking place at the national level. These people are beginning to feel it is now possible to move ahead towards what has become a widely shared vision. They have already learned to cooperate.

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